

BUDDHIST ART: INTERNALISATION AND INNOVATION

As I sit down to pen stray thoughts on innovation and tradition in Buddhist art on the holy soil of Buryatia, a darkening sky at the Aginsky Monastery and heart-breaking tears flowing down the face of Bandido Hambo Nama hold me captive in the cultural genocide of dogma. An eerie silence and His Holiness wrote on a piece of paper in Tibetan: all is burnt, all xylographs and paintings (pothis and thangkas). Suddenly he snatched the paper from me, folded it and hid it in his sleeves. Suppressed agonies had broken into these heart-sending tears on the serene face of the Hambo that glowed with deep learning and radiant hopes of the descent of Maitreya in the near future, so that Dharma would blossom again in his Land of Vajrapani.

While at Ivolginsky Monastery, I had requested for a visit to the Aginsky Monastery whose fame I had heard as a child of ten from my father Prof. RaghuVira. As children our traditional education in Sanskrit was grammar, logic and poetics, supplemented by the Raghuvamsa of Kalidasa. The Sanskrit text on logic was hard stuff, so father gave me *Buddhist Logic* by Stcherbatsky. I could not follow this great work but one fact stuck to me from it that Aginsky was a place of stupendous learning and some day I would go to study there. Aginsky was the Oxford University of the Buddhist world in my limited knowing, especially when Nalanda had been burnt down and reduced to rubble. When I was in Aginsky in 1970s, saw remaining fragments of its immense library, and marvelous thangka scrolls. I wanted to pay respects to the spot where thousands of manuscripts became victims of fire. Bandido Hambo Lama J. D. Gomboyev pointed out the place, stopped at a safe distance to avoid any eventuality of violating the law of the land, and I went alone. No signs of any burning, but the earth was black. Nature does not lie. I bowed down, took some soil came back to the Hambo who took away the holy soil and returned 't to the ground. He was moved and must have recalled barbarism that had destroyed his alma mater the Aginsky. The pent up feelings of the day hidden under a hard and silent exterior, broke down in the evening when only two of us were watching the colourful evening sky fading into the darkness of the night. We were alone, no built structures which could have been bugged with secret gadgets, and the Hambo could have the freedom to weep. Those times did not permit even "freedom of silence". Such was my tryst with Aginsky. It lives in my dreams of a great future that I shall not see. The Hambo gave me

a gorgeous thangka of Kalacakra from Aginsky and I treasure it as the radiance of Dharma and as the diamond light of the affection of the Bandido Hambo Lama. It is the great lion's roar of his profound silence.

Prof. Baldanzhapov was my constant companion during the visit to Buryatia. Devout at heart, a widely-read researcher with a fantastic collection of Mongolian, Manchu, Chinese and Tibetan xylographs and documents, he was on duty of the KGB with me as a Member of the Parliament of India. He wanted to open up his mind and to inform me of what had happened, but silence was wisdom. His gifted daughter, Ts. P. Vanchikova has written a book on Buryat Budhism entitled "The Land of Vajrapani" (Moscow, 2008). She speaks of her Magic Land of Buryat-Mongolia in a poem. Some lines are:

Can it be a heavenly Pure Land?
Perhaps, next to Shambhala.
Emptiness is the essence of everything.
Buryat-Mongolia is Emptiness.

Its frontispiece has a ferocious Vajrapani, so dear to the Mongols of all the tribes of the Buryais, Khalkhas, Ordos, Tumeds, Kalmyks, and others, who once upon a time were world conquerors. Out of fear of their invasions, the countries of the West were once chanting the litany *Demise, libera nos a Tartaris* ("Lord, free us from the Tartars") (pl. 1).

As the symposium is being held at the Rinpoche Bagsha Monastery in Ulanude under the patronage of Elo Rinpoche, in the Land of Vajrapani, we will follow the evolution of Vajmpani in the different traditions and the innovations in his iconography in space and time. His iconic translocations are stunning: from the Hellenic Zeus in Gandhara art to a ferocious demonic figure in Buryatia. In the entire Greek world Zeus was worshipped as the master of gods and men. Even when a city venerated another deity, Zeus took the first place. The temple of Olympus had a colossal gold and ivory statue of Zeus. When Buddhism spread in the Gandhara region with its heavy Hellenist overtones, Lord Buddha was accompanied by Zeus as Vajrapani in a dress identical in all respects with that worn by an attendant: a short chiton caught retinal the waist. He holds a fly-whisk in the right hand and a vajra in the left (pl. 2). He was to attract the devotees of Zeus to Buddhism [Marshall, p. 47, fig. 63].

The *upaya* or strategy of interiorisation was to popularise Buddhism. The outside became inside by the admission of the alien deities. It was an ongoing process. Asoka converted the shrines dedicated to the folk yakshas into Buddhist caityas. Likewise, in the Lamaist world the local *sa.bdag* became dharmapalas. In course of times, Indra was assimilated into the cult of Vajrapani. It is evident in the rock-cut sculpture of Vajrapani in the Aurangabad cave of about the seventh century [Saraswati, p. IVII, fig. 164] (pl. 3).

A stone statue of about the tenth century in the Nalanda Museum shows Vajrapani sitting on a throne, wearing ornaments and a jewelled crown [Ibid, fig. 166]. The Lankavatara-sutra speaks of Vajrapani as a special attendant on the Buddha.

The Gilgit Manuscripts of the Bhaisajyavastu of the Mula-sarvastivada Vinaya point out that Vajrapani accompanies the Buddha to the trans-Gandhara region in place of Ananda. Ananda goes up to Kashmir, Mathura, Rohtak and other places. The Buddha says: I have to go to Uttarapatha (i. e. trans-Gandhara) with Vajrapani to convert the Nagaraja Apalala. After the violent conversion of Apalala, the Buddha returns to the starting point and finds Ananda: *gato'ham Ananda Vajraparii-sahaya Uttarapatham*. It is a reference to the role of Zeus in the spread of Buddhism in the NorthWest. From the benign form of the statue in the Museum fur Asiatische Kunst, Berlin to the dreadful yaksa generalissimo in the Buryat icons shows the incredible range of variation in Buddhist art. In lands of Tibetan Buddhism, he became a ferocious figure in several epiphanies as can be seen in my *Dictionary of Buddhist iconography* 14.4017—4057.

The Buddhist concept of *upaya-kausalya* or Skillful Means was Buddhist skill in adapting Dharma to the context in which it was delivered. Lord Buddha would explain his teachings, for example to the brahmanas, with reference to their rituals and other traditions. The method of teaching in accordance with the capabilities of the hearers was perfected by the bodhisattvas as one of the paramitas in the seventh stage (*bhumi*). *Upaya* is the principle of the manifold integral to the activity of the absolute in the phenomenal world. This led to the continuing adaptation of local deities into the symbology of Buddhism. Maitreya the Buddha of the Future is Mithra of Mithraism, seated in *bhadrasana* or the Bactrian (Bhadra) posture. Mithra was the patron of the Achaemenian emperors, and later of the Roman emperors. The stupa in the crown of Maitreya signifies the State. The *bhadrasana* of Maitreya is contradistinctive of the *vajrasana* of Sakyamuni. Dipankara of the Ramyaka (mod. Lamghan) valley was owned by the Buddhist tradition as the Buddha of the Past. Thus arose the Trinity of Buddhas of the Past, Present and Future (Dipankara, Sakyamuni, Maitreya).

Innovation was an important aspect of the phenomenal spread of Buddhism where the existent religious orders and the new Dharmadhatu became an integral unity. Innovation has been a tradition in Buddhism and it equally applies to Buddhist art. The very physiognomy of the Buddha varies region to region. The colossi of Bamiyan were created in an area whose inhabitants spoke Tocharian. The Tocharian language belongs to the European family and they were close to the Hellenic world whence they inherited the idea of a colossus, termed *abhyuccadeva* in the Sanskrit Gandavyuha.

Openness as a creative category is what distinguishes Buddhism from other religions. This hieratic freedom has been the basis of the evolution of fine arts in several countries and Over many centuries. To make it clear, we may take a counter-example. In the ninth century, the German clergy brought forward the three-language doctrine according to which Church services could be held only in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. In 855 Cyril evolved the script in Byzantium and wrote the Bible in Slavonia in Bulgaria which welcomed him and Methodius. Cyril defended the right of the Slavs to have their own script and the Bible in their language at the Venice Ecclesiastical Council. Slavonic church service says of Cyril: "you raised the axe of reason against the falsehood of the trilingual dogma, named holy". It is just the opposite in Buddhism. Lord Buddha studied 64 scripts at school according to the Lalitavistara, which signifies that all scripts and languages are holy. From the very beginning Buddhism encouraged the emergence of ethnic unities and multiple idioms of visual representations as valid spiritual development. Many windows of heart and mind in the bright crystal of eyes become the intransient essence of the iconic devotion of the Buddhist world. The ever-changing artistic norms were to endow lives, human lives, with glows and glories of the divine. The thousands of Buddhist scriptures evidence the ever-progressive innovation in the metaphoric mindscape.

The vast panoramas of paradises in the caves of Tunhuang show the different conceptions of power and affluence of the changing dynasties. The Pure Land of Amitabha is Sukhavati, that of Maitreya is Tusita, that of Aksohhya is Abhirati, that of Vairocana is Akanistha. These theologic and philosophic Pure Lands from different sutras were the vow of each Buddha to create his own Buddha-land (*Buddha-ksetra*) that would combine the most outstanding feature of various Pure Lands. The splendor of the lands, their perfect bliss, and no suffering gave an opportunity to the artists to innovate, to be "at rest amidst motion". The Buddhist concept of asanga "freedom from attachment" became unrestricted freedom in austere sublimity or in sublime austerity. The seen was the activity of the Formless Self. In terms of samadhi, Buddha is not an image, but whatever is seen or arises in the mind is Buddha. Buddhist art was the attaining of freedom from what has form, to be awakened to formlessness. Leaving rules to crumble was part of non-attachment.

The Buddhist paintings are "Visual Dharma" to convey the message of a Sutra in illustrations. The figures do not stand for external beings but represent aspects of transmuted ego. Transmutation is through meditation practice. The awakened mind is characterized by compassion, fearlessness and energy which devastates confusion, and transmutes into all-pervading awareness.

Vimalakirti-nirdesa is the glorification of layman Vimalakirti revered in the graphic arts as inspiration as well as pleasant humor. It represents

his goal of spiritual longing, the austerity of spiritual practice, so that our minds open to ever-widening spheres of voidness. Vimalakirti finds the very disciple of Lord Buddha Sariputra too complacent in his superiority of wisdom. He opens him to the dazzling relativity of interpenetrating universes. The tenth chapter narrates: Sariputra thought to himself: "if these great bodhisattvas do not adjourn before noon-time, when are they going to eat?" Vimalakirti came to know the thoughts of Sariputra and said: Sariputra you should concentrate on eight liberations taught by the Tathagata, listening to the Dharma with a mind free of preoccupations with material things. Just wait a minute, you will eat such food as you have never before tasted". Vimalakirti concentrated and the bodhisattvas could see the universe of Tathagata Sugandhakuta and his bodhisattvas taking their meal. The text goes on. It is a delightful reading for us all who are more concerned with the externals than with the depths of Buddhist art. Vimalakirti spoke to Sariputra: "Eat of the food of the Tathagata. It is ambrosia perfumed by great compassion. Do not fix your minds in narrow-minded attitudes". Cave 61 of Tunhuang shows a mural with the Tathagata Sugandhakuta pouring out food "issued from inexhaustible morality, concentration, and wisdom, the remains of the food of the Tathagata contained in this vessel cannot be exhausted" (pl. 4).

In Buddhism, as in other traditions of India, an image is *murti* 'concrete'. The Unmanifest (*amurta*) becomes manifest (*murta*) in the icon. It is the shape of a transcendent vision in the creativeness of the artist so that the subtle body of inner experience become plastic form. An artistic work exists on three levels: the physical (*kayika*), the subtle (*vacika*), and the transcendental (*citta*) planes. They are embodiments of states of being. *Murti* requires *Darsana*, the concrete form has to become awareness where the eye and mind are focused in contemplation. The eye's pilgrimage has to transcend into the beatific vision in detachment from everything.

In Buddhism, continuity and change in our cosmic consciousness are interdependent categories. Our "Store Consciousness" or *alaya-vijnana* is the collective psyche in which individual experiences (*mano-vijnyana*) are deposited to reappear in a single flux. In the parlance of art, Classical norms and dynamics of change have to be harmonized. The waters flow because of the two banks of rivers. If there were no banks the waters would not flow, they would slush into marshes. Buddhist art has deep roots and will blossom ever afresh. The *samskaras* have to be firmed by new forms so that they live in our space and time. Buddhist art is golden like the Hiranyavati or the Golden River and continues to illumine the Way for millions today and will continue to renew itself.

An extraordinary Japanese Buddhist sculptor was monk Enku (1632—1695) whose wooden sculptures arose from fast chisel strokes, free from traditional iconography, simple and unfinished to preserve the original coarse

quality of the material. For example, plate 5 represent Acala Vidyaraja like manifestation of virtuoso wrath. A carving in plain aromatic cedar in the harmony of art and nature for simple folk. His sculpters were carved on chips and splinters of wood and were known as *koppa batsu* “Chip Buddhas”. In the economy of strokes and a rough and direct style they seem extremely modem. Enku had vowed to make 100,000 sculptures in his life time. It is termed *laksa-puja* or “hundred-thousand prayers”. It took him 28 years to fulfill his vow, and by then he was fifty-nine. On the back of his last sculpture he wrote “one hundred thousand Buddhas completed”. Thus he completed the first part of his worship of the ‘iconic’ which is technically called *sakara*. It had to culminate in the *nirakara* or an-iconic of samadhi. Enku asked a hole to be dug in the ground beside the Nagara River. He sat in it, had it covered thick with earth, and put a bamboo tube to breathe. Fasting, chanting prayers, ringing a bell he remained intoned and passed away. He attained supramundane samadhi of *sunyata*, *animitta* and *nirvana*. Tall oak and cherry trees entwined with wisteria vines stand at the spot. People in the village say that these vines will bleed if anyone cuts them. To cite monk Enku himself:

Each day the mind grows purer
The moon and the sky and myself
Round and full.

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Oxford

ICONOGRAPHY OF THE FRESCOS OF MINDROLLING STUPA IN DEHRA DUN, INDIA

Mindrolling is one of the six main monastic academies of the Nying-ma or ‘Old Translation’ school of Tibetan Buddhism. The original monastery, with its accompanying great stupa, was founded by the renowned *terton* or ‘treasure revealer’ Terdak Lingpa in 1676, and is situated in the Drachi Valley about forty kilometers to the east of Lhasa. As a consequence of the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959, many lamas and lineage holders were forced to seek refuge in India, these included a small group of monks who accompanied the throne-holder of Mindrolling, His Holiness



1.

Ваджрапани
XX в. Агинский монастырь, Россия

Vajrapani
20th cent. Aginsky Monastery, Russia



2.

**Ваджрапани как метаморфоза Зевса
(справа от Будды)**

Гандхара. II в.

Музей искусства Азии, Берлин

**Vajrapani as the metamorphosis of Zeus
to the right of Lord Buddha**

Gandhara. 2nd cent.

Asian Art Museum, Berlin



3.

**Ваджрапани как воплощение Индры
(справа от Будды)**

Ок. VII в. Пещеры Аурангабада, Индия

**Vajrapani as epiphany of Indra
to the right of Lord Buddha**

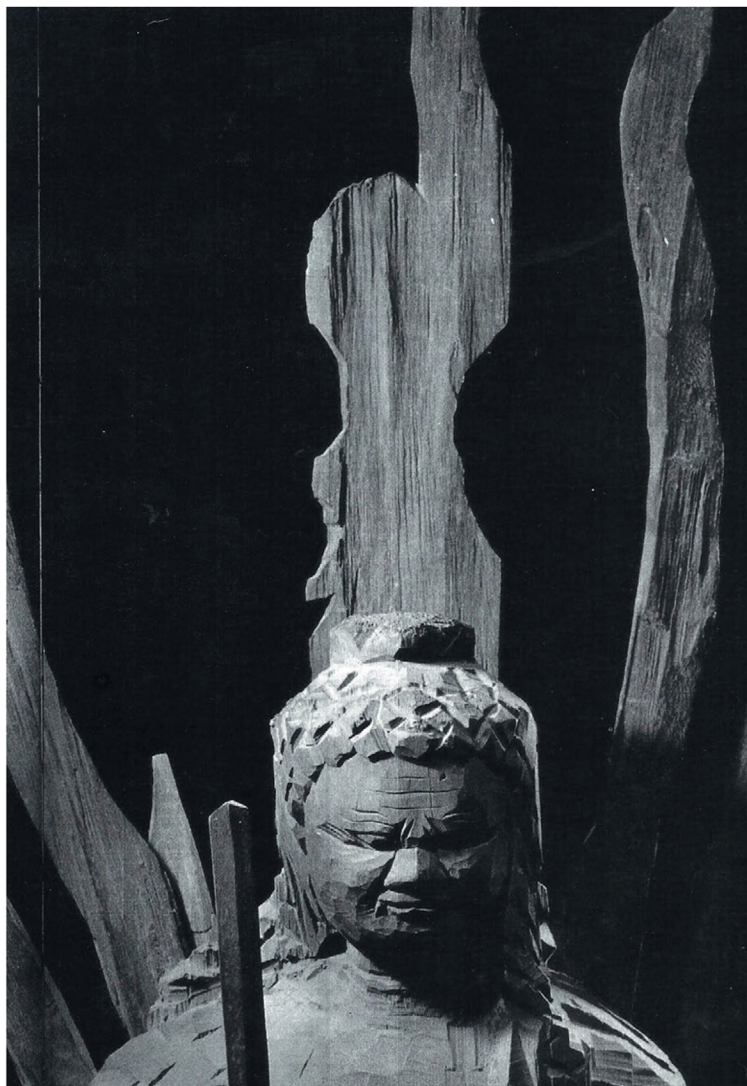
About 7th cent. Aurangabad Caves, India



4.

Татхагата Сугандхакута,
изготавливающий неисчерпаемую пищу
 Период Пяти династий (907-960)
 Дуньхуан, пещера 61, Китай

Sugandhakuta Tathagata pouring
inexhaustible food
 Five Dynasties period (907-960)
 Tunhuang, cave 61, China



5.

Ачала Видьяраджа
Монах Энку (1632-1695)
Япония

Acala Vidyaraja
Monk Enku (1632-1695)
Japan